

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## Exhibit opens honoring life and art of Winfred Rembert, long-time New Haven resident

Until December, a New York City gallery will be presenting a retrospective of the work of this acclaimed artist, who strove to reveal the horrors of racism through autobiographical leatherwork up until his passing earlier this year.

By Sylvan Lebrun - October 08, 2021



Winfred Rembert, *Civil Rights – I have A Dream*, 1999. Dye on carved and tooled leather, 35.5 x 23.75 inches.  
Courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.

On Thursday evening, “Winfred Rembert: 1945-2021” opened to the public at the Fort Gansevoort Art Gallery in New York City. The exhibit is a three-floor solo retrospective of former New Haven resident Rembert’s portraits of the joy and trauma of Black life in the South, completed just over six months after his death earlier this year.

Winfred Rembert was born in Cuthbert, Georgia, where he was imprisoned as a young man while demonstrating for civil rights. His story is one of impossible survival — he lived through a near-lynching

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and afterwards spent seven years on a chain gang, during which time he met his wife, Patsy Rembert, and learned from a fellow inmate how to tool leather. After his release from prison, he moved north with his wife, eventually settling in New Haven where he lived and worked as an artist for more than 30 years.

Rembert's retrospective at Fort Gansevoort was in the works prior to his passing in March. It emerged as a collaboration between Rembert, his wife and the gallery's owner, Adam Shopkorn. It consists of a chronological series of Rembert's leather paintings, accompanied by text taken from his recently published autobiography. The exhibit will be on display until Dec. 18.

"These pictures that [Rembert has] done ... some of them brought him joy, some of them brought him pain," Patsy Rembert said at a Wednesday morning press preview. "This was something that he needed to do in order to leave a legacy behind to teach people what happened to him, what happened to a lot of others. He was lucky enough and blessed enough to be able to express himself and to tell his story that I thought needed to be told."

Patsy Rembert led a walk-through of the gallery at the preview, discussing each painting and the events from Rembert's life that inspired them. The works are arranged by the dates of the scenes depicted, taking the viewer from Rembert's early childhood up until his years of incarceration and labor in Georgia.



Courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.

The collection begins on the first floor with a painting titled "The Beginning" that portrays the artist as an infant, accompanied by other works set in the schoolhouse, his home kitchen, a local river and the cotton fields where Rembert and his neighbors worked.

Paintings on the second floor capture the events within a relatively short frame of time that led to Rembert's arrest, near-lynching and reincarceration. "The Getaway" depicts him stealing a car in order to escape two white men who chased him with guns while he was protesting for civil rights, an act that he was then jailed for.

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Illustrated in the consequent works, Rembert escaped the jail cell by overpowering a guard but was then recaptured and taken by a mob to be lynched. This is the scene pictured in “Wingtips,” a painting named after the wingtip shoes of the man who finally ordered for the mob to stop.



Courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.

“Now this man, I don’t know who he was,” reads the quote from Rembert on the painting’s placard. “The only thing I know is this: He had power. He said don’t do it and they didn’t do it, even though they wanted to.”

After this near-death experience, Rembert was sentenced to a prison term of hard labor, a seven-year period that dominates almost the entire third floor of the exhibit. Patsy Rembert explained that they met while he and his fellow inmates were working on a bridge next to her house, a chance encounter that led to a marriage of 46 years.

The couple moved to New Haven soon after Rembert was freed, living first in the Dwight neighborhood and then in Newhallville. According to Patsy Rembert, this was “the best move they could have made.”

It was in the Elm City that Rembert developed his artistic passions, using the leatherworking skills that he learned during his time on the chain gang to create detailed carved paintings, his wife said. After selling his first work with the help of Hamden antiquarian bookstore owner Phil McBlain, he started to do a number of small shows in the city.

Jock Reynolds, former director of the Yale University Art Gallery, was another one of Rembert’s mentors. Soon after the two met in 2000, Reynolds offered him a solo show at the YUAG — the gallery still holds his triptych “The Lynching, After the Lynching, The Burial.”

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The opening of the Fort Gansevoort retrospective comes just after the release of Rembert's autobiography, a story he dictated to co-writer Erin Kelly over the course of four years. The book, which was published on Sept. 7, is called "Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South" — a title that the artist came up with himself as a reference to the memories of past traumas that haunted him up until his death, Patsy Rembert explained.

"He always would wake up fighting or running, he jumped completely out of the bed ... because he would be fighting trying to save his life," Patsy Rembert said.

Adam Shopkorn, the owner of Fort Gansevoort, shared how he began working together with Rembert to create the exhibition during the last 90 days of the artist's life, spending time with Patsy Rembert and their children as well.

He had first seen one of Rembert's works four years prior in Atlanta at the High Museum of Art. Shopkorn shared that Rembert's painting "The Dirty Spoon Cafe" made him "stop in his tracks," memorizing the artist's name for the future. By the summer of 2020, plans for a Rembert retrospective at his gallery had begun to materialize.

"His entire life story is told through his paintings," Shopkorn said. "There's trauma in these paintings but there's also great joy and great love. ... I did want to show some of the more dramatic paintings, so it can really be in your face, so people could really understand what happened without sugarcoating everything."

Shopkorn described the curatorial process for this exhibit as a "wild goose chase" as he tried to convince the owners of Rembert's works to lend them to be shown. He wanted to highlight the events of his arrest and near-death as the "heart of the show."



Courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.



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Though Rembert has many light-hearted paintings — one of which, a riverside scene called “The Curvey,” is on view in the gallery — Shopkorn said that he and his team ultimately decided that their priority was to portray the artist’s story of suffering and survival.

“I think those more celebratory or joyful pictures take on more meaning when you know this story,” Andrea Schwan, the communications consultant for the show, said during the walk-through. “You can’t really just start with those. You have to start with the life of the artist, because that’s everything he’s showing.”

The centerpiece of the exhibition, located on the far side of the third floor and coming last in the chronological order of paintings, is an imagined self-portrait titled “Almost Me.” The work shows a young Rembert unconscious and hanging from a noose, a glimpse into what would have happened if his lynching had not been stopped.

Next to it on the blank white wall, there is a printed block of text from Rembert’s autobiography, an excerpt of which is included below.

“And when I die, I didn’t die by the rope,” the excerpt reads. “I just died from being an old man. I lived my life out. My children, when I’m gone, can read about it, and that picture will be there to speak for me. If you stand and look at it, the picture will talk to you.”

To see Rembert’s work, visit Fort Gansevoort at 5 9th Ave. in New York City.